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The Willingness to State an Opinion:

Inequality, Don't Know Responses and Political Participation

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Abstract

Most explanations of inequality in political participation focus on costs or other barriers for those with fewer economic, educational, and "cognitive" resources. I argue, drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's work on "political competence," that social position in the form of income also structures political participation through differences in the sense that one is a legitimate producer of political opinions. I

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test whether income differences in participation persist net of costs by examining non-participation in a setting in which barriers to participation are low: answering political survey questions. Lower-income people are more likely than others to withhold political opinions by saying "don't know" net of differences in education, "cognitive ability," or engagement with the survey exercise. Further, political "don't know" rates predict voting rates, net of other predictors. Efforts to democratize participation in American politics must attend not only to the costs of involvement but also to class-based differences in individuals' relationship to political expression itself.

Keywords: political participation, public opinion, inequality, Bourdieu

Introduction

Class inequality in participation in American politics is a persistent challenge to democratic ideals. People with lower incomes are much less likely to vote than are those with higher incomes (Schlozman, Verba, and Brady 2012; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980), who in turn have a disproportionately large influence on American politics and policy (Gilens 2012). Understanding the sources of political non-participation among poorer people is therefore key to efforts to make American democracy more fully representative.

Most explanations of class differences in voting rates implicitly treat electoral politics as a nearly-natural medium through which individuals express their will for the society; the underlying logic is that in a democracy where every (non-felon, over-18, citizen) voice *can* count, everyone ought to want to participate (but see Olsen 1982). These approaches thus search for mechanisms which block an implied generalized inclination towards political involvement, and then cast political inequality as the direct result of disparities in individual-level skills and resources (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995) or of class-linked barriers to participation (e.g. Piven and Cloward 1988).

An alternative approach is laid out by Pierre Bourdieu (1979; 1984; 1991), who conceptualizes citizens' relationship to politics as but one of many settings in which people interact with dominant social institutions, such as schools, workplaces, or cultural fields. His work on politics thus frames political participation as one kind of "taste" for legitimated culture, shaped not only by possessing actually relevant resources, but also by a sense of ease with the topic that comes from having a dominant position in the "field of class relations" (1984, 399). In this approach, income and its correlates (such as education and occupation) facilitate greater political participation not just through contributing to people's technical ability to understand and engage with politics, but also through molding their subjective sense of their place in the world so that they feel both entitled and

expected to have political opinions, and to express those in daily life, in surveys, and through voting and other forms of political engagement.

Whether we understand low participation among the disadvantaged as the result of reducible costs, or as a consequence of classed differences in how people relate to politics, has profound implications for efforts to make the democratic process more equal. Reducing external barriers or even “cognitive costs” will have little democratizing effect if lower-income people are nonetheless reluctant to even express political opinions.

Survey response offers a chance to measure individuals’ willingness to state political opinions: in surveys, citizens are asked to contribute to political discourse without the costs of getting to the polling booth (or other more demanding political work). It has long been recognized that “don’t know” (DK) responses are patterned by education, but most scholars have treated this as simply another example of those with fewer of the necessary skills and resources participating less.

Instead, in this paper I demonstrate that DKs are a source of valuable information about political participation. I use data from two large, representative surveys to show that political DK rates are much more stratified by income than are non-political DK rates. I test a number of explanations for this, and find that differences in education, “cognitive ability”,[1] survey cooperation, and DK rates on non-political questions neither explain nor erase income differences in political DKs. People who give DK answers to political questions do so despite encouragement by carefully trained interviewers administering survey instruments specifically designed to elicit political position-takings; lower-income people disproportionately abstain from participating in this political exercise

[1] The literature on educational inequality makes clear the impossibility of distinguishing ability from education and other forms of cultural capital. However, because many accounts of inequalities in political participation explain classed differences as cognitive differences I use this term throughout.

despite the deliberate and systematic removal of barriers to their participation. Political DK rates also predict voting, net of other standard predictors. I show that the income gradient in participation in political survey-question-answering is not attributable to skills or resources, and suggest that class differences in democratic participation are not simply the result of costs or barriers.

Class and Relation to Politics

Political participation is usually defined as some variation of “legal activities by private citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of government personnel and/or the actions they take” (Verba, Nie, and Kim 1978, 46). It can take many forms from voting only, to making changes in one’s community (Bang 2005), to party and campaign activism; however it is measured, those who are politically inactive are disproportionately drawn from the lower parts of the educational, income, and occupational hierarchies (Li and Marsh 2008; Olsen 1982). In fact, one of the most consistent findings in studies of American politics is that the most-advantaged participate the most. This is frequently attributed to differences in politically-relevant resources or skills, acquired at work and through family (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). One of the most common explanations for greater voting among the higher-income is that they also tend to be better-educated; education is believed to increase voting because it increases an individual’s sense of civic duty and their cognitive skills (which are seen as necessary to understand the complexities and abstractions of politics), and also grants exposure to bureaucratic systems, making registering and voting less daunting (but see Berinsky and Lenz 2011; Galston 2001). Other explanations for political inequality focus on the electoral system rather than individual deficiencies in skills or resources; Piven and Cloward (2000) argue that low participation among the disadvantaged reflects obstacles erected to protect party elites' dominance. These accounts all assume that it is the costs and complexities of politics, whether in time, logistical hurdles, or cognitive effort, that disproportionately disenfranchise the disadvantaged.

This assumption rests on the premise that everyone has some inclination to express themselves in electoral politics, and thus that lower-income people would participate more, if only it were easier for them. Any reduction in the costs of and barriers to any form of participation, such as voting, should therefore be expected to reduce inequalities in participation. However, efforts to ease access to registration and voting have had the opposite effect: they increased the consistency with which already-advantaged citizens vote, while doing little to increase voting among the disadvantaged (Berinsky, Burns, and Traugott 2001; Berinsky 2005; see also Rolfe 2012). Similarly, vast growth in educational attainment has not resulted in any concomitant rise in turnout in elections (Wattenberg 2002), and relative education has a larger effect on most kinds of participation than does absolute education (Nie, Junn, and Stehlik-Barry 1996; Tenn 2005). These findings challenge cost and skill-based explanations for income inequality in political participation.

It may be that barriers to voting[2] have not yet been sufficiently reduced, or further education no longer provides additional politically-relevant skills and competencies. Another possibility, however, is that lower-income people develop a different relationship to political expression than do those who are better-off, just as they do to many other cultural activities and social institutions. Sociologists, following Bourdieu's work in *Distinction* (1984), have shown time and again that people's tastes for many activities and approaches to many kinds of institutions are structured by social position (e.g. Bryson 1996; Dimaggio and Useem 1978; Lareau 2003; Lizardo 2010; Vaisey 2010). Habitus—the set of dispositions and ways of seeing the world that is shaped by social position and trajectory (Bourdieu 1977)—is a good way of thinking about the relationship between class and all kinds of social judgments and decisions (see Cerulo 2010; Lizardo 2004; Vaisey and Frye

[2] and other forms of political participation; I focus on voting as the most-accessible according to Milbrath's (1977; Ruedin 2007) hierarchy.

Forthcoming); this applies just as much to politics as to art museum attendance, musical tastes, or relationships to schooling. Bourdieu described the sense that one is both a legitimate and a skilled producer of political opinions as a key component of "political competence":

> To understand the relationship between educational capital and the propensity to answer political questions, it is not sufficient to consider the capacity to understand, reproduce, and even produce political discourse, which is guaranteed by educational qualifications; one also has to consider the (socially authorized and encouraged) sense of being entitled to be concerned with politics, authorized to talk politics [...]. (1984: 409)

It is not only Bourdieu who identified the importance of a (class-linked) sense of being duty-bound or entitled to talk politics; poor and working class people in the U.S. have told qualitative researchers that they feel only well-off people are entitled to political positions and influence (Croteau 1995; Eliasoph 1998; Fantasia 1989; see also Gaventa 1980; Halle 1987).[3] Further, there are class differences in responses to survey questions about attitudes towards politics: lower income and less educated people report being less interested in politics, feeling alienated from politics, feeling that other people understand politics better (internal efficacy), and believing that they can have little impact on politics (external efficacy; Laurison 2012; Niemi, Craig, and Mattei 1991; White 1968). These attitudes have all been shown to predict lower rates of political participation (Adams, Dow, and Merrill 2006; Beaumont 2011; Denny and Doyle 2008; Morrell 2005; Pollock 1983). Bourdieu argued that these patterns of "'interest' or 'indifference' towards politics would be better

[3] Eliasoph deliberately avoids emphasizing the class composition of the groups she studies, but in an appendix acknowledges that her least-engaged groups are also the least-educated and lowest-income; members of the least-engaged group tell her that they see political opinions and thus participation as only for those, unlike themselves, who "have all the facts" (p. 134).

understood if it were seen that the propensity to use a political power (the power to vote, or 'talk politics' or 'get involved in politics') is commensurate with the reality of this power, or in other words, that indifference is only a manifestation of impotence" (1984: 406). In other words, disinterest in politics and low internal and external political efficacy are all manifestations of the perception that many relatively disadvantaged people have that political debates, much like art galleries and opera houses, are dominated by and intended for other, better-off, kinds of people. Items that measure political interest, efficacy and related concepts therefore capture this belief to some extent, but leave open the central question of the relationship between social position and willingness to engage in politics, of any form, in the first place. "Don't know" responses offer a unique opportunity to examine this question because surveys are specifically designed to equalize access to opinion-expression.

Bourdieu reported the classed (and gendered) distribution of "no opinion" response to political questions and argued that they revealed this relationship between social position and the sense of being entitled to engage with politics (1979; 1984), but his analyses did not arbitrate between different possible causes of "don't knows." In what follows, I examine patterns of political "don't know" response to assess whether inequalities in this form of political participation persist even when structural barriers are absent and relevant skills can largely be measured and controlled for.

Don't Knows

When a respondent says "I don't know" to a question about politics (or gives a related response such as "I haven't thought much about that" which is recorded by the interviewer as a DK), this can be understood as a particular kind of political abstention (Berinsky 2004). Investigating responses to political survey questions can expand our understanding of political non-participation and individuals' relations to politics more broadly because answering a given survey question incurs

essentially no additional cost in time or economic resources beyond those required to participate in a survey interview in the first place; indeed, when "don't know" is not offered as an option, the "cost" of answering "don't know" is arguably slightly *higher* than that of selecting one of the given options. The direct effects of material resources on political participation are therefore essentially neutralized.

"Don't know" responses are stratified by social position: those with less education are more likely to give DK responses to political questions (Berinsky 2004; Converse 1976; Schuman and Presser 1979) just as they are more likely abstain from voting and other forms of political involvement. Studies generally interpret DK responses as stemming from a lack of what Bourdieu (1979; 1984) called "technical" political competence—whether and to what degree subjects have the knowledge, education, or "cognitive capacity" necessary to form opinions on political topics and then apply those opinions to questions asked by survey researchers. These studies argue that those without relevant skills and knowledge will be more likely to say they "don't know" rather than pay the "cognitive costs" of matching fuzzily-held beliefs to survey question responses (Berinsky 2004).

However, other research on DK patterns shows that not knowing about an issue is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for giving a DK response. Interviewees often produce opinions when they might prefer not to: when items explicitly include "don't know" or something similar (called a "filtered" question) as a response option, an additional 20% to 25% of respondents choose that response, compared with an identical question without a DK filter (Schuman and Presser 1979). It follows that when a DK option is not offered, between a fifth and a quarter of respondents who choose a substantive answer would have said "don't know" if the option were offered. Further, 25% to 30% of respondents provide opinions about issues which are fictional or extremely obscure, where "I don't know" is almost certainly the accurate answer (Bishop, Tuchfarber, and Oldendick 1986; Schuman and Presser 1980; see also Krosnick 2002).

Conversely, respondents say DK when they might otherwise have produced an opinion.

There are three explanations of mechanisms besides pure lack of technical competence that lead to DKs: the subjective or social competence discussed above, plus "satisficing," and social desirability effects. Satisficing is the term for the behavior of a respondent who has tired of a survey exercise, and is no longer interested in matching their real opinions to the available survey options; instead they simply pick responses that appear satisfactory to the interviewer (Krosnick, Narayan, and Smith 1996). Choosing DK is one way of satisficing, especially when DK is explicitly offered. However, on questions without a DK or equivalent option, respondents generally satisfice in other ways, for example by picking the neutral answer or the first plausible answer choice offered (Krosnick et al. 2002), so satisficing is unlikely to explain DKs on unfiltered questions. The second case of non-ignorance-based DK responses is when subjects have opinions but perceive revealing them to be socially, not cognitively, difficult. Some people who hold unpopular or stigmatized beliefs give DK responses on topics such as the equality of racial groups (Berinsky 1999; Berinsky 2004).

Thus, while people sometimes say they "don't know" due to an actual lack of knowledge, the absence of "technical competence" cannot fully explain this decision (Beatty and Hermann 2002). Not knowing the answer to a question does not lead everyone to say "don't know," nor does having an opinion always lead to opinion-expression. Although it is not possible to know for certain why any individual responds "don't know," the lack of a one-to-one relationship between actual and reported not-knowing means mechanisms besides technical competence can generate DK responses.

What all "don't knows" have in common is that they are an abstention from entering one's opinion on an issue, an unwillingness to express an opinion. The differences between political and non-political DK rates suggests that political DKs reflect not only lack of technical competence, but also a lack of subjective or social competence, that is, not feeling "*competent*, in the full sense of the word, that is socially recognized as entitled to deal with political affairs, to express an opinion about them or even to modify their course" (Bourdieu 1984, 409; Rapoport 1982 makes this distinction as

well; see also Francis and Busch 1975). Having shown that socially disadvantaged respondents are more likely to say "I don't know" to political questions, many previous researchers have been too quick to attribute this pattern to classed differences in *skills*. Therefore, they have overlooked the possibility that DK rates are also due to classed differences in *willingness* to offer political opinions.

The Willingness to Offer Opinions

I argue that political DK rates (as well as abstention from voting and other forms of political participation) result at least in part from class-linked unwillingness to participate, rather than only from cognitive or circumstantial barriers to political engagement. I test this argument against two alternative models of political DK responses, and then examine the relationship between political DK rates and the act of voting. My claims can be stated as a series of hypotheses:

1: Income significantly predicts political DK rates. This hypothesis emerges directly out of the extant literature. To specify the nature of the relationship between income and political DKs further:

1a: The effect of income on political DK rates is attributable to correlated differences in education, comprehension, or "cognitive ability." This is the dominant interpretation of political DKs, that they stem from respondents' difficulty matching underlying preferences with the question terms (Berinsky 2004; Converse 1976; Krosnick 1991). If technical competence sufficiently explains political DKs there should be no significant effect of income on political DK rates after controlling for measures of cognitive capacity and education. I expect to reject this hypothesis: if those with lower incomes say DK more, net of measures of technical competence, then differences in the willingness to offer political opinions can help explain inequality in political participation.

1b: The effects of income on political DK rates are attributable to correlated differences in respondents' attitude to the survey as a whole. It may be that differences in political opinion-giving reflect differences in individuals' willingness or motivation to respond to all survey questions. That is, something about

their attitude towards questionnaires or survey-interviewers, rather than something specific in their relationship towards politics, makes them reluctant participants. For example, Krosnick (1991) suggests survey resistance is one cause of satisficing behavior. I expect to reject this hypothesis as well: if political DK rates are important for understanding people's classed relationship to politics, controlling for indicators of attitudes toward the survey itself, such as answering DK on *non-political* questions, will not eliminate the relationship between political DK rates and income.

2: Political DK rates will significantly predict reported and actual voting rates, net of the standard controls. If political DK rates are indicative of a basic unwillingness to voice political opinions, DK rates should predict voting rates.

Data, Variables, and Models

To compare DK rates across a range of question topics, I analyzed data from two long-running nationally representative surveys: the General Social Survey from 1973 to 2008, with 51,430 respondents and yearly response rates between 70.4% and 79.9%; and the American National Election Survey, from 1974 to 2008, with 34,444 respondents, both the cumulative file and the 2008 single-year release, with response rates ranging from 59.5% to 70.4%. Both ask a series of questions about politics, political opinions, and voting. I used the full range of years available in the GSS, and the same years in the ANES, in order to have sufficient leverage to analyze the relatively rare DK responses; however, additional analyses reported in the Methodological Appendix[4] show consistent patterns across individual survey years and subsets of years.

Dependent Variables

[4] Appendices giving details for all questions analysed across both surveys, as well as additional analyses, are available at http://www.daniel-laurison.com/things-i-ve-written/dont-knows.

I selected questions for analysis based on item frequency and substantive content. First, I only included questions asked of at least 10% of all respondents since 1973, and asked at least once in 1996 or later. (I also include an alternate version of the political ideology question on the GSS, even though it was only asked of 785 individuals, because these ideology measures are central to previous approaches to political behavior. Results are nearly identical if this is excluded.) From the questions that met these criteria, I first classified questions as either clearly related to politics, clearly separable from politics, or ambiguous. I classified questions as political if they asked explicitly about electoral politics or government policies. I classified questions as ambiguous, and thus excluded them from these analyses, if they addressed politicized issues but were framed in moral terms, or referenced individual choices, without explicitly invoking government agencies or actions. I excluded all questions about homosexuality and racial and gender relations because, although they are clearly subject to political debate, these tended not to mention government directly. Further, DKs for these types of questions are especially likely to be influenced by social desirability (Berinsky, 2004), and to have varied substantially over the time period studied. In the GSS, I classified as ambiguous many of the "nat" questions which ask about our nation's spending priorities (a political question), but on topics which are not usually overtly politicized, such as transportation, cities, and the space program. On the ANES, I also excluded questions asking for evaluations of respondents' own representatives since these all require specific knowledge about a particular elected official, and those questions where the cumulative data file mixed DK responses with other kinds of off-script responses such as "both/neither" or "it depends." This left 20 political questions and 22 non-political questions in the GSS, and 13 political and 6 non-political questions in the ANES. Three questions from the GSS and five from the ANES have DK filters; analyses with only unfiltered questions show substantively similar results. The set of questions included in these analyses, along with the percentage of respondents who said DK to each item, is presented in the Methodological Appendix.

I recoded these 61 questions into binary variables, with "1" for a DK response and a "0" for any other kind of non-missing response (I left missing responses missing). The codes for DKs varied across releases of the GSS cumulative file and within individual ANES data files; I used the codebooks to carefully distinguish between DK codes and those for other types of missing data.

No respondents were asked all questions on either survey, so to compare DK rates across individuals I created four additional variables in each dataset: counts of individuals' numbers of political and non-political DK responses, and counts of the number of political and non-political questions each individual was asked. I divided individuals' DKs of each type by the number of questions of that type that they were asked to give each person a political and a non-political DK rate. I multiplied these political and non-political DK indexes by 100 so that a score of 100 means the respondent answered every single question posed to him or her in that category with "don't know," while a 0 indicates no DK responses. On the ANES, 32.9% of respondents said DK to at least one question I analyzed; on the GSS the figure was 18.9%.

The GSS has a lower total DK rate—an average of 3.4% on the questions included in this study—than either the ANES (8.9% for included questions) or the polls analyzed by classic studies of DK responses (Converse, 1976; Schuman & Presser, 1979). This is due at least in part to the General Social Survey's infrequent use of "filtered" questions, where "don't know" or "no opinion" is an explicit answer choice. Although it means analyzing fairly rare events, the relatively low rate of DKs is in fact helpful to this project: if the GSS succeeds in minimizing the chance that people will respond with "don't know," then those who do say DK must be exceptionally reluctant to give their opinion on that issue. Further, the results are robust across model specifications and a number of sub-divisions of the datasets (described in the Methodological Appendix), and are substantively identical in both surveys, despite their differences in design, topics, and DK rates.

The final analyses presented below show the relationship between DK rates and political participation in the form of voting. In both datasets, I created a variable coded 1 if the respondent reported voting in at least one of the presidential elections about which they were asked, 0 if they had not voted, and missing if they said they were not eligible to vote. Rates of reported voting on surveys are generally higher than actual turnout, and tend to over-represent the effects of education and income (Ansolabehere and Hersh 2012; Holbrook and Krosnick 2010), so I also examine the validated vote (available from the ANES, which checked voter records in 1976 through 1990).

Independent Variables

The GSS and the ANES have divergent systems for coding education and income; in recoding both datasets, I sought to maintain as much information as possible while allowing for parallel analyses. The analyses presented here focus on income. In the ANES cumulative file, income is grouped into five percentile categories: 16th percentile and below, 17th to 33rd, 34th to 67th, 68th to 95th, and 96th percentile and above. In the GSS I generated respondents' income percentile in the year surveyed; I use this continuous measure of income in the regression models, and a set of categories that matches the ANES for descriptive figures.

Technical competence theories (Hypothesis 1a) predict that DK responses will be explained by education and other measures of competence. The ANES records education in seven categories (which I recoded to six, combining junior and technical degrees with "some college"), and the "degree" variable in the GSS has five categories. Models using the GSS's more fine-grained education variables have substantively identical results (as do other transformations of income; see Methodological Appendix). The GSS includes two other indicators of technical competence or "cognitive capacity": vocabulary score and comprehension of the interview. Vocabulary score is the "wordsum" item, which is the number of words (out of 10) that a respondent could correctly define; to account for possible differences across years, I subtracted the respondent's score from the mean

score for that year, then recoded to range from 0 to 1, with the highest scores at 1. Comprehension of the interview ("comprend") records the interviewer's perception of the respondent's understanding of the questions; recoded, 1 is the highest level of understanding and 0 is the lowest.

Satisficing theory describes DK responses as the result not only of cognitive task difficulty, but also of lack of commitment to the survey exercise itself (Krosnick et al. 1996). To test this explanation (Hypothesis 1b), I included in my models three measures of the respondent's attitude toward the survey. First, I used the proportion (scaled 0-1) of non-political questions to which the respondent said "don't know." Second, the GSS includes a measure of the interviewer's perception of the subject's attitude toward the interview ("coop"). I recoded this to range from 0 to 1, with 1 being the most cooperative. [5] Finally, I also include refusal to report income in all models not only to allow inclusion of people with missing income data, but also as a measure of possible general survey-recalcitrance.[6] The inclusion of these three controls should account for the possibility of social position being correlated with general interview resistance and contributing to political DK rates through that mechanism. If income significantly predicts political DKs net of these controls, I can reject Hypotheses 1a and 1b.

If there is a status-based unwillingness to express political opinions, it could be related to racial group membership, immigration history, and gender as well as income; certainly none of these aspects of social location can be considered in isolation from the others (Crenshaw 1991), and all are

[5] Both "coop" and "comprend" are somewhat endogenous measures—higher levels of total DKs might lead interviewers to code respondents as less cooperative or comprehending. This should lead to underestimates of the strength of other relationships, though, making my estimates conservative.

[6] Refusing to report income may primarily be an expression of privacy around money, but it also indicates a willingness to refuse to answer a question, so it also captures attitudes towards the survey.

included in my models. In both the ANES and the GSS, I used the ethnicity variables to create five racial-ethnic groups: Black, White, Latino/Hispanic, Asian/Asian-American/Pacific Islander, and Other Racial Groups, which includes Native Americans. I also included measures of nativity—whether the respondent was born in the United States on the GSS, and whether his/her parents were on the ANES (as respondents' birthplace was not asked after 1994).

Model Specification

The analysis proceeds below from a comparison of DK rates on political and non-political questions by income to models of the predictors of political DK rates in both datasets. All multivariate models use the respective surveys' suggested weighting, and in the GSS account for clustered sampling, but the results are substantively unchanged without weights. Where a respondent had missing data for any variable (except income) in a model, that respondent was dropped from that analysis. Most covariates in my models had very low rates of missing data; most variation in Ns across models has to do with variation in the questions asked across ballots and years, not individual non-response. I next examine the association between political "don't know" rates and both reported and validated voting. Models contain year fixed effects to account for the fact that DK rates were generally lower for later years of the ANES and in the early 2000s on the GSS. [7]

I use negative binomial regression[8] for counts of political DK responses in each dataset to evaluate whether political DKs are simply direct effects of education or "cognitive skills," or whether

[7] See Methodological Appendix for changes over time. There are fewer GSS DKs for the early 2000s because of a change in the way interviewers recorded non-offered options (Smith and Seokho 2003).

[8] Regression modeling is often used to explain causes of a phenomenon. I present these models to distinguish between social characteristics that are linked to higher DK rates, even within otherwise-

income predicts political "don't knows" net of these factors. The number of political questions asked of each respondent varied substantially, from 1 – 15 with a mean of 10 for the GSS, and from 1 – 13 with a mean of 6.6 for the ANES. I include this as an exposure in the models. Because even a single DK response is a relatively rare result, especially in the GSS, I modeled these relationships using a variety of equations: zero-inflated negative binomial regressions to account for the large proportion of respondents with no DK answers; logistic regressions to predict *any* DK to a political question as well as for each individual question; and OLS regressions[9] for the DK rates. I also modeled these relationships within individual survey years, five-year-periods, and decades.[10] All these approaches, despite their different functional forms, assumptions, and theoretical underpinnings, returned substantively similar results.

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similar groups, and those that are linked to higher DK rates only when taken in the aggregate. These models are not intended to explain all the causes of DK response.

[9] Zero-inflated negative binomial regression (ZINB) is actually the best fit for the GSS, but works less well for the ANES for both theoretical and data-driven reasons: the ANES lacks variables measuring respondent attributes, which make theoretical sense as a separate process generating "excess" zeros; it also has substantially fewer people with no DKs, i.e. fewer zeros. The non-zero-inflated NBREG, then, is the best fit for parallel analyses of the two datasets. The Methodological Appendix presents ZINBs for the GSS, with substantively identical results.

[10] I include most of these analyses in the Methodological Appendix, as well as comparisons to alternative measurements or equations mentioned in the main text. I also tested for possible multicollinearity concerns, with satisfactory results.

Finally, I use logistic regression to model voting, using the variables in the models of DKs, plus a number of other measures known to predict increased political participation: home ownership, church attendance, having a union member in the family, being contacted by a political party or campaign prior to an election, and internal political efficacy (the extent to which the respondent feels they have a good understanding of political issues).[11] Many of these attitudes and attributes are also associated with political DK rates. However, since my purpose in the models predicting DK rates is only to test whether social position is associated with less willingness to express political opinions, they are not included in those models.

Results 1: Don't Know Rates

To address Hypothesis 1a, that technical competence sufficiently explains political DK rates, we can first ask: are political questions meaningfully more difficult than other types of survey questions? A question can be difficult either in form (question length, language complexity) or in content (the topic, abstractness, or obscureness of the question); but topic, and especially whether a question is political or not, is by far the strongest question-level predictor of DKs (Converse 1976). Politics is often considered intrinsically more difficult than other topics, and that is used to explain higher DK rates on political questions (as well as class inequalities in political participation more generally). However, many non-political questions are at least as abstract and potentially unfamiliar. Consider a set of questions which ask respondents to locate their position on a scale between two opposed concepts. The GSS asks respondents to rate their opinion of human nature between "fundamentally good" and "fundamentally perverse and corrupt" ("world4"), and to rate their own political ideology between "extremely liberal" and "extremely conservative." Although both

[11]Question wordings for these are included in the Methodological Appendix.

questions ask respondents to pick a number between 1 and 7 in relation to two opposed positions, and neither is filtered, only 0.23% of respondents said "don't know" about people's fundamental nature while over 18 times as many, 4.25%, said "don't know" about their own political views.[12] It is hard to see how the characteristics of human nature are inherently less complicated or more knowable than political ideology; moreover, respondents who genuinely *do not know*, but feel entitled or expected to have an opinion on either issue, can easily pick a neutral (or any other) answer and move on; but political ideology generates over 18 times as many DKs. This pattern of greater DK response for political than for non-political questions holds across the entire set of questions analyzed: "don't knows" correspond more to whether or not a question has to do with politics than to how difficult or abstract the question is (Converse 1976 also found only small effects of other measures of difficulty).

Figures 1a and 1b show the weighted average DK percentage and the percentage who said DK at least once, for each dataset, by income group. Over a quarter of those in the lowest income group say DK at least once to political questions on the GSS, and fully half of the lowest-income respondents say "DK" to at least one ANES question.

[Figure 1a, Figure 1b, and Figure 2 about here]

There are substantial (and statistically significant) differences in DK rates on political questions between those with higher incomes and those with lower incomes, while DK rates on non-political questions are much lower overall (as in Converse 1976) and much less differentiated by income. While differences in political DKs between income groups have mostly been interpreted as due to differences in average educational levels, Figure 2 shows that these differences by income

[12] The DK rates for the two other versions of the political ideology question are even higher: 7% say DK to "polviewx" ("left" vs "right"), 16% say DK to "polviewy," a "filtered" version of "polviews."

obtain across all education levels (except possibly among the most educated) in the ANES; there is no such pattern for non-political questions (these relationships are the same in the GSS). In the next section I conduct multivariate analyses to assess whether incomes predict DK responses net of measurable differences in education, technical competence, and attitudes towards the survey exercise.

Results 2: Predictors of "Don't Knows"

Table 1 presents the results of three negative binomial regressions of political DK rates; column 1 shows results for the ANES, column 2 for a matched model in the GSS, and column 3 for a model using the additional measures of "cognitive ability" and interview cooperation in the GSS. The fourth column shows the estimated percent change in DK responses based on Model 3.

[Table 1 about here]

For political questions, income predicts DK rates even after controlling for technical competence and interview cooperativeness. As Table 1 shows, lower incomes are strongly associated with higher DK rates on political questions in both surveys. In the GSS, the coefficient for income is negative, indicating fewer DKs as income increases; in the ANES, all the coefficients for income groups below the reference group (the 68th - 95th percentile) are positive, indicating greater DK counts for those with incomes below the 68th percentile; being in the top 5% income group predicts saying DK to political questions significantly less often than the reference group does. The estimated effect of moving from the bottom to the top of the income percentile range in the GSS is an average of 13% fewer DKs to political questions. The estimated effect of being in the lowest income group in the ANES, compared to the reference group (69th – 95th percentiles) is 54% more political DKs; for the next-lowest group it is 34.5% more.

[Figure 3 about here]

Figure 3 shows the average marginal effect (and 95% confidence intervals) of income within the degree categories for the GSS; the relationship is strongest for those with the least education (as we also see in Figure 2), but holds across education levels (models with an interaction income-education interaction term show no significant interaction effects and worse fit than those without).

Technical competence theories attribute DK rates to cognitive capacity, and satisficing and other approaches attribute DK rates to survey attitudes. As predicted, education, vocabulary scores and greater comprehension of the interview, as well as reporting one's income, having fewer non-political DKs, and being seen as a cooperative participant, are all associated with lower DK rates. However, these strong associations do not erase the relationship between other aspects of social class and political DK rates. Even controlling for three different measures of technical competence and three indicators of survey compliance, those with lower incomes are substantially more likely to say DK to political questions than otherwise-similar people with higher incomes.

This clearly disconfirms Hypotheses 1a and 1b; those with higher incomes are more willing to offer political opinions *net* of technical competence and attitudes toward the survey itself. Income is not a significant predictor of DK answers on non-political questions but the relationship between lower incomes and more DKs holds across subsets of political questions (see Table A5 in the Methodological Appendix) and for individual political questions (see Table A6).

The political participation literature links income with access to resources that could facilitate political participation, but it has few explanations for greater reluctance to "participate" in a situation such as the survey interview where neither free time nor money facilitate answering questions[13], once

[13]One resource-based explanation for the effect of income on political DK rates is that higher incomes are associated with occupations in which incumbents learn and practice abstract thinking,

there is initial agreement to participate in the survey. In fact, the survey setting has been praised specifically for removing the barriers that cause unequal participation in politics.[14]

Although I set out primarily to test the relationship between class, "don't knows," and political participation, it is clear from these models that income is not the only kind of privilege associated with a greater willingness to offer opinions. Men say DK to significantly fewer political questions than otherwise comparable women.[15] [16] These differences between men and women may also be due to status-based norms about who is and is not expected to be "politically engaged" or have answers to political questions (Atkeson and Rapoport 2003; Bourdieu 1979; Verba, Burns, and Schlozman 1997; but see Polletta and Chen 2013 on how this may be changing in some settings).

The relationships between race, ethnicity, and nativity, and willingness to answer political questions are less straightforward. The direction of the relationship for African-Americans differs across the two surveys, the difference between Asian-Americans and Whites is significant in the GSS but not the ANES, and the difference between Latinos and Whites is not significant in either survey.

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which equips them to deal with political questions. Methodological Appendix Table A8 shows that income is not acting as a proxy for occupation nor occupationally-acquired reasoning skills.

[14]Berinsky (2004) reports that Sidney Verba gave a speech to this effect at the American Political Science Association annual conference in 1996.

[15]Education and income effects on the DK rate parallel the effects of education and income on voting, but the effect is reversed for gender. Men vote at slightly lower rates than otherwise similar women, although they engage more in other forms of political action (Verba et al., 1995).

[16]This relationship may have changed over time, as gender equity has increased. Analyses of GSS data support this argument, but the ANES data do not (but see also Atkeson & Rapoport, 2003).

Few conclusions about race and political opinion expression are thus warranted based on these analyses; research with datasets with larger samples of people of color (such as Wong, Ramakrishnan, and Lee 2011) is needed. It is clear that being born in the United States, or having parents born here, reduces DK rates; this may be due to language difficulties or the challenges of immigrant political incorporation (Bloemraad 2006).

Results 3: Political DKs and Voting

Do political DK rates capture a general sense of entitlement to participate in politics, or only the willingness to express political opinions in surveys? To answer this question, I examine whether political DK rates predict voting.

[Table 2 about here]

Higher rates of political DKs predict substantial and significant decreases in the probability of both reporting and actually voting. Table 2 shows that even after including an array of other attributes and experiences known to consistently predict voting, those who are the least willing to offer political opinions in the survey setting are also less likely than others to have voted. Even in the model with the most covariates (column 5), the predicted effect for moving from no political DKs to the top of the scale is a 33% drop in the probability of having voted, and for going from no DKs to 1 DK the predicted effect is a 2.5% decrease; predicted effects are larger in the simpler models. This relationship holds even with models that include all the resource-related variables that significantly predicted DK rates in Table 1. This indicates that DK rates are measuring political reticence, not only levels of cognitive ability or material resources that facilitate political involvement, and provides support for Hypothesis 2. One benefit of looking at DK rates to understand the way status shapes political participation, rather than asking about related concepts such as political efficacy or interest with survey questions, is that the survey essentially captures behavior—the behavior of absenting

one's self from presenting political opinions. Thus political DK rates predict voting even in models including measures of internal efficacy (columns 3 and 5).

Discussion

If resources matter for participation only because they make a material difference—having the money to donate, the skills to organize and write letters, the time to go to meetings or research positions—these effects would be neutralized, by design, in the survey setting. If resources and technical competence alone caused lower participation, we would not expect to see resource-related discrepancies in DKs after controlling for measures of technical competence, given that saying "don't know" when it is not offered requires at least as much effort (going off-script) as does picking an answer at random. Income alone should not increase technical competence, but it improves social position, and increases respondents' willingness to provide their opinions on politics.

It could be that political DKs simply capture differences in knowledge or intelligence (Hypothesis 1a). For that to be the case, however, differences would have to be so strongly correlated with income, net of education and other measures such as the vocabulary test and the interviewers' assessment, that they could entirely drive the income coefficients. Similarly, it might be that political DKs only capture general recalcitrance or reticence (Hypothesis 1b), that lower-income people might be just less likely to express any opinions, or that they might be less inclined to help out survey researchers. However, the large differences between political and non-political DK rates shown in Figures 1a and 1b, combined with the inclusion of non-political DK rates and measures of the interviewer's assessment of the respondents' cooperativeness as controls in the models of political DK rates and of voting, make that a very difficult case to make.

Finally, it could be that lower-income people say DK more to political questions because they care less about, are less interested in, or feel more alienated from politics than those with higher incomes. "Not caring" of any of these types, along with actively *disliking* politics, are both

theoretically and empirically related to sensing that one is not a legitimate producer of political opinions, that politics is something by and for people unlike one's self. Low-income and working class people in qualitative studies of political engagement (e.g. Eliasoph 1998; Croteau 1995) express all these sentiments, and survey measures of political interest, efficacy, and caring are somewhat correlated with each other, with political DK rates, and with voting[17].

However, it is possible analytically to separate these kinds of attitudes towards politics from feeling entitled to participate: previous research has made clear that, in the absence of a DK "filter," apathy, disinterest, and for many people even genuinely not knowing what one's opinion is, leads to satisficing with random, guessed, or neutral answers, not DKs (Krosnick, Narayan, and Smith 1996; Bishop, Tuchfarber, and Oldendick 1986; Schuman and Presser 1980). Since only a few of the political questions analyzed have filters, and results are substantively identical when filtered questions are excluded, lack of care and disinterest are unlikely to be unobserved drivers of DK responses[18].

What I have shown here, then, is something related to, but distinct from political interest and efficacy, as well as political apathy, alienation, or antipathy: lower-income people are less willing to offer opinions than otherwise-similar better-off people, even in a situation where most costs are minimized. Political DKs, along with questions about caring, interest, and efficacy, measure an attitude held by many lower-income and otherwise-disadvantaged Americans: they do not feel that they are legitimate, authorized, or effective participants in political discourse or decision-making.

Conclusion

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[17] My analysis of ANES data.

[18] Further, income still predicts DKs net of these attitude variables in regressions similar to those in Table 1, and political DKs still predict less voting net of these attitudes in regressions similar to those in Table 2. All analyses are available upon request from author.

Traditional models attribute classed inequalities in political participation to differences in resources, knowledge, cognitive capacities, attitudes and skills. If these were the only reasons disadvantaged people participate less, there would be no inequalities in willingness to answer political questions once relevant skills were held constant. However, I have shown that lower income people are more likely to say DK to political questions net of these other differences. Class affects political participation not only through differences in cultural capital, education, or "cognitive skills," but through pervasive differences in lower-income groups' willingness to express political opinions.

It is possible to imagine times or places where people would be less willing to offer opinions on abstract religious, philosophical, moral, or sociological issues far outside of their daily experiences than on the best actions for governments to take. But my findings on non-political DKs suggest that in contemporary America, nearly everyone is a legitimate producer of opinions on the moral status of extramarital sex, the characteristics of God, and the determinants of individual achievement. Not everyone, however, is equally willing to pass judgment on political questions: those with the lowest incomes respond DK to political questions much more than their peers do, regardless of their measured technical competence to answer such questions.

Although it is not possible to know what respondents are thinking or feeling when they answer DK to political questions, we know that DKs do not simply reflect lack of knowledge or understanding. Instead, my findings support the interpretation that DK rates reflect an aspect of many poor and working-class people's relationship with politics found in other studies (e.g. Bourdieu 1984; Croteau 1995; Eliasoph 1998): a sense that the realm of politics is not for them, that they are not sanctioned producers of political opinions. While other studies have shown that lower-income people report feeling less politically interested and efficacious, this article demonstrates they are also disproportionately abstaining from even essentially barrier-free political participation, and that this

disengagement from political discourse cannot be attributed to differences in education or cognitive abilities. Instead, it indicates a lesser sense social, as well as technical, political competence.

These findings have implications for many areas of sociology as well as for public opinion and political participation research. Much public opinion research could benefit from a more sociological approach to survey-answering (Manza and Brooks 2012; Perrin and McFarland 2011), including continuing to look to DK answers as sources of information rather than simply challenges to overcome. Responding "don't know," especially on unfiltered questions where it would be just as fast and easy to choose a neutral response or guess an answer at random, indicates unwillingness to participate in that question topic, likely based on the respondent's sense—despite all the assurances offered by survey protocols—that she or he is not a legitimate producer of opinions on those issues.

Scholars of culture may take this investigation into the relationship between social position and a particular set of cultural "tastes" (for, or for avoiding, politics) as an invitation to continue broadening the scope of cultural sociology to include individual engagements with areas not typically considered "cultural." Classed dispositions affect how people see, interpret, and relate to the world around them, not only the kinds of music they listen to or their success in school.

This study also demonstrates the value of Bourdieu's work on politics for interpreting empirical patterns. Despite the fact that he was very concerned with politics (e.g. 1991; 1996a), few studies in American sociology (let alone political science) draw on Bourdieu's work when approaching politics.[19] Instead, scholars too often conceptualize politics as a realm of purely instrumental action; whether they see it as open to individuals across society or restricted to a "power

[19] This is not the case in France; many scholars (e.g. Gaxie 1978; Michelat and Simon 1985), have preceded, drawn on, extended, and debated Bourdieu's work on political competence; unfortunately, little of this work has been translated into English.

elite," politics is treated as entirely different from fields like art, literature, or even education (but see Swartz 2006 and 2013; Medvetz 2012; Mudge and Vauchez 2012).

Most importantly, studies of political behavior should take seriously status-linked differences in individuals' willingness to offer their political opinions; this sense of "political competence" (in addition to skills and resources) is a necessary precursor to any kind of political participation. The implication of the results presented here is that lower-income people feel less entitled to, and less obligated to, involve themselves in politics. Economic inequality produces political inequality not simply by making it more materially or logistically difficult for some people to participate, but by making it more difficult for them to believe that they are legitimate participants in the process.

As recent studies of the effects of election reforms meant to ease access show (Berinsky 2004; Burden et al. forthcoming), structural and procedural barriers are not the only forces keeping people away from the polls. Those interested in increasing access to political participation must think about not only the structural barriers to voting, but also the ways individuals far from political power understand and relate to electoral politics. If lower-income people see politics as something only for other kinds of people, no amount of barrier-lowering will eliminate income inequalities in political participation. The sense of not being a legitimate participant in politics, like any other socially structured judgment, is not a fixed or natural effect of resources or social position, but a consequence of a particular set of relations between social agents and the field of political production (Bourdieu 1991; 1996b); for example, the relationship between social position and voting was very different in the US in the era of machine politics.

Most of contemporary U.S. politics is aimed at those who are already likely to participate, and so those with the fewest resources are largely ignored. Policies aimed only at making voting easier, or at stressing the importance of voting, have failed to change the sense many people have that politics is something done by other people. All the ease of access in the world will not cause someone to

vote if they do not feel competent or entitled to even offer political opinions. Fortunately, studies by Bedolla and Michelson (2012) show that it is possible to change this dynamic: when low-income people who have rarely or never voted are asked to vote by a neighbor—someone who is like them in some meaningful way, and is clearly engaged with electoral politics—they are much more likely to do so. Those who want to increase political participation among the relatively disadvantaged in the United States might think about policies and practices that make meaningful connections between electoral politics and poor and lower-income people.

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